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22 May 1968

MEMORANDUM FOR: The Honorable William Bundy
Assistant Secretary for East Asian
and Pacific Affairs
Department of State

SUBJECT : Strength Figure Disagreements

REFERENCE : State TODEL 108 [REDACTED]
17 May 68

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1. Per our conversations, this Agency has serious reservations about the figures on North Vietnamese strength in South Vietnam communicated to Governor Harriman in the referenced cable and used by him in his 18 May statement. Although we assisted in the preparation of this material, we did not see the final draft of the reference prior to its transmission, even though this draft appears to speak in the name of the entire Intelligence Community.

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The actual number of North Vietnamese Army troops in South Vietnam is significantly greater than the figures given in Governor Harriman's statement on Saturday, 18 May, suggest. The figures used are from MACV's official collateral OB, which for a number of conceptual and methodological reasons, understates both VC and NVA regular troops, but the latter most seriously. A large part of the omission results from the fact that no consideration has yet been given by MACV to the heavy 1968 infiltration.

MACV's total for all main and local force troops is 122,500, of which 72,000 are in NVA units and 50,500

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are in VC units. Of these latter MACV estimates that 15,000 are NVA fillers for a total of NVA soldiers of 87,000. We estimate that total main and local force troops number about 160,000. Of these, about 95 - 100,000 are in NVA units and 60 - 65,000 are in VC units. We have no independent estimate of the number of NVA soldiers in VC units. MACV's 15,000 estimate seemed reasonable for the first of the year when it was made, but the number is certainly higher now. Utilizing the 15,000, we estimate the number of NVA soldiers in these forces at about 110 - 115,000 and the number of Southerners at about 45 - 50,000. Our estimates, as well as MACV's, are for end of April.

Neither MACV's or our estimates include any rear service support troops. Our estimate for these troops is 60 - 80,000, which is double the MACV estimate. On the order of 25 percent of these troops are probably NVA soldiers.

We are concerned over the use of the low figure. First, because it understates the case of NVA presence in SVN. Second, and of far greater potential significance, it could cause us trouble if we get to a state involving phased withdrawal of NVA (and allied) troops from SVN.

2. I am, of course, not suggesting that the Governor should revise his remarks. Indeed, there may be some augmentative or debating merit in using a lower set of figures more susceptible to hard proof. In the future, however, I would like to insure that documents transmitting general intelligence judgments are coordinated with this Agency. I am also concerned about the possible -- though at present not very likely -- contingency that if we ever do start seriously discussing trade-offs with the North Vietnamese, we may get hung on our own low figures.

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